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‘Neo-Ottomanisation’ and old narratives: representing modern Turkey in the Balkans

By Laura Wise (<http://www.asfar.org.uk/author/laurawise/>)



On the 15th of May 2013, the Ankara Summit Declaration was signed by the trade and economy ministers of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, and Turkey. It asserted the desire of all three states to boost co-operation in areas such as trade, educational, energy, and infrastructure. This agreement marked the latest in a string of policy engagements made by the Turkish government, under the leadership of the Justice and Development party (AKP), and the area considered to be both the Ottoman legacy and modern Turkey's 'near-abroad'; the Western Balkans. Despite *The Economist's* assertion in 2011 that talk of an Ottoman resurgence was unfounded – due to the soft-power nature of Turkish activity which primarily focused on monument restoration, soap-operas and universities¹ (<http://www.asfar.org.uk/neo-ottomanisation-and-old-narratives-representing-modern-turkey-in-the-balkans.html#1>) – the list of economic sectors in which Turkey wishes to invest continues to grow. As the signing of the Ankara

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declaration signifies, this desire to improve relations between Turkey and South-Eastern European states has been given a positive reception, with Serbian Foreign Minister Ivan Mrkic enthusing that 'the quality of the political relations (between Serbia, Bosnia and Turkey) is so high that it makes it possible for us to operate on fourth markets together.'² (<http://www.asfar.org.uk/neo-ottomanisation-and-old-narratives-representing-modern-turkey-in-the-balkans.html#2>).

The extent to which Turkey currently has the capacity to become a significant economic player in an area struggling to prosper in the wake of recent (and in the case of Kosovo, still unresolved) conflicts, is a question that has been widely discussed by analysts and forecasters. It has been used to judge the potential shape of the region economically. What has failed to receive the same attention, however, is the manner with which this surge of Turkish engagement in the Western Balkans has been covered. The intense Turkish westward turn has been accompanied by a flurry of media attention repeatedly expressing ethnically-framed fears that such activity creates in areas still part of the vast Ottoman Empire just over a century ago, and the power that collective memory has to constrain modern foreign policy.

Rather than replicate economic and strategic analysis of Turkey's Balkan policy, this article questions the link between civic memories of Ottoman rule, inter-ethnic distrust, and a Turkish agenda of investment and regional co-operation. It seeks to examine whether it is possible to discuss the relationship between the Ottoman past of the Balkans and modern Turkish policy without subscribing to discourses of fixed collective memory and narratives of ancient hatreds.

Writing the Balkans, Imagining Turkey

The Western Balkans is no stranger to being described with an 'ancient hatreds' narrative. Rather, the region had the dubious honour of becoming its poster-child when former British Prime Minister John Major infamously and simplistically attributed the collapse of Yugoslavia to the concept. To him, the world had witnessed a violent breakdown of inter-group relations rooted in the memory of past atrocities and conflict. Policy driven by an uncivilized and primitive nature is also a narrative that has historically been utilised in reference to Turks by European commentators. Drawing from theories of identity construction articulated by Levi-Strauss and Derrida, Yurdusev argues that the depiction of Turks as 'destructive savages' contributed to the self-affirmation of Europeans as civilized and progressive. He states that this is formed in contrast to their barbaric neighbours in Turkey through negative representations, and that the construction has lasted into the 21st century.³

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(<http://www.asfar.org.uk/neo-ottomanisation-and-old-narratives-representing-modern-turkey-in-the-balkans.html#3>) However, in recent discussions of Turkey's Balkan policies, it is possible to identify a merging of both Balkanist and Orientalist discourses, whereby modern Turkish foreign policy can only be discussed alongside references to the negative experiences of the region's Ottoman past, and the reactions of Western Balkan populations are constrained by their inability to separate Turkish investment from fears of colonial domination.

Arguably discussions of an Ottoman legacy are appropriate. It would be revisionist to deny the experiences of a collective Ottoman past, which ties Turkey to the Balkans, as Ahmet Davutoglu, Turkey's Foreign Minister, has readily asserted.⁴

(<http://www.asfar.org.uk/neo-ottomanisation-and-old-narratives-representing-modern-turkey-in-the-balkans.html#4>) From the architectural reminders of Ottoman-built mosques, bridges, and markets, to an estimated one million people with Turkish origins,⁵ (<http://www.asfar.org.uk/neo-ottomanisation-and-old-narratives-representing-modern-turkey-in-the-balkans.html#5>) the historical impact across the region cannot be denied. What is evident, however, is that the aspects of this past which are highlighted by external commentators in reference to Ankara's contemporary engagement, are those that focus on the darker aspects of the period. The vandalism of Byzantine churches in Macedonia, harsh treatment of Orthodox Serb populations, and widespread 'fear' from groups which launched rebellions against the Ottoman empire in the 19th and 20th centuries, are all examples which have recently been employed by Western journalists to suggest that a contemporary Turkish presence in the Western Balkans is inevitably problematic. It is implied that the modern, predominantly secular, Turkish state can in no way be separated from the violence of its colonial past. Meanwhile, even the softest form of cultural influence is discussed in colonial language, with popular Turkish soap operas described as having 'conquered' audiences across the Balkans.⁶ (<http://www.asfar.org.uk/neo-ottomanisation-and-old-narratives-representing-modern-turkey-in-the-balkans.html#6>) There is a need for critical engagement with these strongly asserted claims, despite the fact that they are predominantly based upon anecdotal evidence and primordialist ideas of identity politics and ethnic mobilisation.

Rejecting assertions of modern fears and ancient hatreds

Although it seems absurd to need to qualify that an increase in Turkish-run universities in the Western Balkans will not lead to the stripping of icons from Orthodox churches, the resilience as Turkey as the primitive 'other' to a sophisticated Europe make it necessary. Indeed these refutations have been

publically stated by AKP members, eager to emphasise the 'Europeaness' of their increased investment in the Balkans. One example is President Abdullah Gül reassurance to Balkan leaders at the Southeast European Cooperation Process (SEECP) meeting in 2010 that the values they wished to promote and share with the region were ones of European civilization.⁷ (<http://www.asfar.org.uk/neo-ottomanisation-and-old-narratives-representing-modern-turkey-in-the-balkans.html#7>) Keen to steer the conversation away from the language of conquest and dominance, Turkish politicians and analysts instead highlight the potential impact of conflict resolution, and the country's position as an external mediator. Ankara's recent peacemaker track record is certainly tangible and widespread, with mediations between Belgrade and Bosniak leaders in Bosnia and Herzegovina resulting in the signing of the Istanbul Declaration in April 2010. Diplomatic intervention quelled intra-Bosniak factional disagreements in the Sandžak region of Serbia; and despite the potential friction of Turkey's NATO membership and recognition of Kosovo's independence, the former participated in the early stages of negotiations between Belgrade and Pristina.⁸ (<http://www.asfar.org.uk/neo-ottomanisation-and-old-narratives-representing-modern-turkey-in-the-balkans.html#8>)

The readiness of Serbia to accept Turkey's involvement in the Kosovo issue clearly contradicts a narrative of widespread Serb fears of neo-Ottomanisation. Instead of cautiously mistrusting the motives of a former colonial power, politicians in Belgrade are welcoming Turkish participation on an issue sensitive for the former Yugoslavia; the territorial boundaries of what many believe to be the cradle of the Serb nation. In fact, the only political leadership which has openly resisted establishing a relationship with Turkey, and therefore gives the most credence to arguments of a collective inability to move beyond the past, is the Republika Srpska entity of Bosnia and Herzegovina. The entity's Vice-President, Emil Vlajki, has accused Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan of openly spreading Islamic influences through the promotion of the interests of Muslim populations in the Western Balkans. He asserts that the government of the Muslim-Croat Federation is complicit in this attempt, by establishing positive relations with Turkey.

However, rather than demonstrating the strength of resentment against Turkey as the former Ottoman power, the protests of Republika Srpska can instead be understood in a context of *realpolitik* manoeuvres by an increasingly isolated nationalist entity. Following the failure of internationally-implemented federalism to create an integrated post-conflict Bosnia and Herzegovina, the leadership of Republika Srpska is reliant on whatever bargaining power it can leverage

against the multi-ethnically structured Federation government. Resistance to Turkish investment is an attempt to further oppose the creation of an entity within Bosnia over which they have minimal influence. This limited influence is evident in the enthusiasm with which the Federation leadership has welcomed Turkish investment, particularly in the realms of culture and education. Although the government of Republika Srpska does represent the interests of over one million Serbs in Bosnia and Herzegovina, this pales in comparison to the acceptance of ties between Belgrade, Sarajevo, and Ankara by the majority of the Serbian population. Dissenting voices are primarily rooted in radical nationalist parties who would traditionally be expected to oppose any regional co-operation that did not assert Serb dominance, regardless of the engagement with a former colonial power. The refusal of Belgrade to support Republika Srpska's opposition to Turkey, especially under the leadership of President Tomislav Nikolic, formerly a Member of Parliament for the Serbian Radical Party (SRS), further indicates the limits that the ethnic fears narrative has in relation to the Western Balkan's Ottoman past.

In attempting to understand relationships between Turkey and the Western Balkans, and more broadly between the past and the present, it is certainly prudent to treat a sudden resurgence of interest by any former colonial power with caution and critical exploration. However, the way in which current Turkish foreign policy, and the reception that it has received by Balkan populations, has been treated in journalistic discourse is described, in the words of Maria Todorova, as 'hint[ing] at an analytical explanation of events in the Balkans when real analysis seems too difficult or too time consuming, or not worth embarking on.'⁹

([http://www.asfar.org.uk/neo-ottomanisation-and-old-narratives-](http://www.asfar.org.uk/neo-ottomanisation-and-old-narratives-representing-modern-turkey-in-the-balkans.html#9)

[representing-modern-turkey-in-the-balkans.html#9](http://www.asfar.org.uk/neo-ottomanisation-and-old-narratives-representing-modern-turkey-in-the-balkans.html#9)) Acknowledging

the strong ties Turkey holds to its former Ottoman territories is important, but surmising that this history is inherently negative and limiting is a false narrative which continues to 'other' both Turkey and the Western Balkans. The role of Turkey in promoting both its own interests, and supporting peace and prosperity in the Western Balkans, is still emerging. There is ample opportunity for future media coverage to finally consign the 'ancient hatreds' narrative to the past and instead promote a discussion which truly reflects the complexities of power and identity in south-eastern Europe.

1 The Economist, 'Turkey in the Balkans: The good old days?' (5th November 2011), <http://www.economist.com/node/21536647>

(<http://www.economist.com/node/21536647>) return to main text (<http://www.asfar.org.uk/neo-ottomanisation-and-old-narratives-representing-modern-turkey-in-the-balkans.html#1b>)

2 B92, 'Serbia, Bosnia, Turkey, "together in difficult times"' (8th May 2013), http://www.b92.net/eng/news/region-article.php?yyyy=2013&mm=05&dd=08&nav_id=86069 (http://www.b92.net/eng/news/region-article.php?yyyy=2013&mm=05&dd=08&nav_id=86069) return to main text (<http://www.asfar.org.uk/neo-ottomanisation-and-old-narratives-representing-modern-turkey-in-the-balkans.html#2b>)

3 Yurdusev, N. 'Perceptions and Images in Turkish (Ottoman)-European

Relations' in Turkey's Foreign Policy in the 21st Century, edited by Tareq Y. Ismael and Mustafa Aydin (Aldershot, Ashgate, 2003), p. 85. return to main text (<http://www.asfar.org.uk/neo-ottomanisation-and-old-narratives-representing-modern-turkey-in-the-balkans.html#3b>)

4 Balkan Insight, 'Davutoglu: 'I'm not a neo-Ottoman'' (<http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/davutoglu-i-m-not-a-neo-ottoman>) (<http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/davutoglu-i-m-not-a-neo-ottoman>) return to main text (<http://www.asfar.org.uk/neo-ottomanisation-and-old-narratives-representing-modern-turkey-in-the-balkans.html#4b>)

5 Christianna, L. 'Turkey's Balkan Policy under the AKP' (26th March 2013) (<http://www.defencegreece.com/index.php/2013/03/turkeys-balkan-policy-under-the-akp/>) (<http://www.defencegreece.com/index.php/2013/03/turkeys-balkan-policy-under-the-akp/>) return to main text (<http://www.asfar.org.uk/neo-ottomanisation-and-old-narratives-representing-modern-turkey-in-the-balkans.html#5b>)

6 Taleski, M. 'The rise of Turkey in the Balkans' (11th July 2011) (http://www.setimes.com/cocoon/setimes/xhtml/en_GB/features/setimes/articles/2011/07/11/reportage-01) (http://www.setimes.com/cocoon/setimes/xhtml/en_GB/features/setimes/articles/2011/07/11/reportage-01) return to main text (<http://www.asfar.org.uk/neo-ottomanisation-and-old-narratives-representing-modern-turkey-in-the-balkans.html#6b>)

7 Balkan Insight, 'Regional Leaders Gather at Summit in Istanbul' (23rd June 2010), (<http://old.balkaninsight.com/en/main/news/28965/?tpl=297>) (<http://old.balkaninsight.com/en/main/news/28965/?tpl=297>) return to main text (<http://www.asfar.org.uk/neo-ottomanisation-and-old-narratives-representing-modern-turkey-in-the-balkans.html#7b>)

8 Petrovic, Z, and Reljic, D. 'Turkish Interests and Involvement in the Western Balkans: A Score Card', Insight Turkey, 13 (2011) 3, pp. 160-161. return to main text (<http://www.asfar.org.uk/neo-ottomanisation-and-old-narratives-representing-modern-turkey-in-the-balkans.html#8b>)

9 Todorova, M. 'Introduction: Learning Memory, Remembering Identity' in Balkan Identities: Nation and Memory (London, Hurst and Company, 2004), p.5. return to main text (<http://www.asfar.org.uk/neo-ottomanisation-and-old-narratives-representing-modern-turkey-in-the-balkans.html#9b>)

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